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THE ORIGINS OF THE FIRST PSYCHIC AND OTHER MISREPRESENTATIONS

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Few aspects of the life of Daniel Home have escaped controversy. One notable debate has concerned his use of the name of Dunglas, and the associated claim that his father was the natural son of the tenth Earl of Home. Biographers of Home have disagreed upon the validity of this claim, and the suggestion that the claim was false has been presented by sceptics as part of a general argument that Home was untrustworthy (e.g. Hall, 1984; Stein, 1993). That said, even one of the most ardent defenders of Home's psychic abilities felt that his claim to descent from Scottish nobility was erroneous. George Zorab (1978) attempted to put the matter to rest in an article in the *Journal* entitled, "Have we finally solved the problem of D. D. Home's descent?" It turns out, however, that both Home's critics and Zorab's solution relied upon inadequate evidence and questionable interpretation. This brief Research Note presents the evidence and comes to a quite different conclusion.

In an attempt to determine the truth of the matter, Home's early life, including the dates of his emigration to the United States and that of his family, have been presented as relevant evidence. According to Zorab (1978), Home claimed "that his parents emigrated to the United States, and that he and his aunt followed them and settled there six months later when he was nine years old in 1842". Zorab claims that Home stated this in his autobiography, and that he was "wilfully incorrect" in doing so since he was "about 15 when he left". Zorab's reason for claiming this is based, in turn, on an assumption about the age of Home's younger sisters as being too young to travel. Thus, Home "must have been nearly 15", and old enough "to dream about being the illegitimate child of an aristocratic father". Zorab further assumes that this was a fantasy "that led him to claim he had been baptized Dunglas". Zorab's claims, however, are almost entirely without basis. Home did not state that his parents emigrated to the United States before he did, nor did he state that he settled there six months later. More significantly, he never claimed to be "the illegitimate child of an aristocratic father", but rather that his father had been the illegitimate son of an earl (Home, 1872, p.48). Zorab's other claims are the product of guesswork that, as it happens, is contradicted by direct evidence.

According to Home, he emigrated at "about the age of nine [our italics]" with his aunt and her husband, and he gives no date for when his family emigrated (Home, 1972, p. 1). However, the 1841 census for Currie, where his family lived, lists a William and Elizabeth Hume [sic], residing at 17 Kenleith Mill along with their children: Alexander (9), Mary Anne (6), William (5), and Adam Pennycuik (3). Another biographer, Jean Burton, lists John as the eldest of the children (Burton, 1948, p. 44), but he does not appear in the records for this household, and Zorab (1978, p. 846) assumes that either he was born elsewhere or that Burton was wrong. However, a John Hume (aged 13) is listed on the census at 13 Balerno Mills Cottages, where the head of household is listed as McNeill (Elizabeth's maiden name), so it seems rather more likely that he was the eldest son, and was living with Elizabeth's father in 1841. What is clear, however, is that Home's family had not yet emigrated in 1841.

Daniel was one of nine children, not eight, and had three sisters, not two as claimed by Burton (1948), who relied upon *Beers Genealogical and Biographical Record* of 1905, and accepted by most subsequent biographers (Hall, 1984; Lamont, 2005; Tabori, 1968). The parish register for Currie states that "Mary-Anne-McNeill Home, lawful daughter of William Home and Elizabeth McNeill, was born on the twenty-seventh of April, 1841". Later, it states that "Christina and Elizabeth Home, twins, and lawful daughters of William Home and Elizabeth McNeill were born on the eleventh of December, 1845". Meanwhile, Daniel had moved to Portobello to live with his childless aunt, Mary Cook, and the Portobello census for 1841 lists only one Cook family. By coincidence, the wife's name is Mary, but as three children are also mentioned, and none of them is named Daniel, this is hardly likely to have been the childless aunt who adopted him. In fact, there is no compatible record in any of the parish censuses around Edinburgh at this time.

According to the evidence, then, it seems that Mary Cook and Daniel had already left by the time of the 1841 census, prior to his family, who did not leave before 1846. Zorab's (1978) more important contention that Daniel was old enough to "have known quite enough about Scottish history, folklore and nobility" (p. 846) is therefore somewhat weakened by the fact (supported by documentary evidence rather than supposition) that he would have been no more than eight years old when he left. He might have been told at a young age that he was descended from nobility, but that is hardly evidence of dishonesty.

He may also, of course, have invented the claim later, which was the contention of Trevor Hall. Hall (1984) went into somewhat tedious detail to argue that Home's father, William, was unlikely to have been descended from the Earl of Home, and noted that, as the name of Dunglas did not appear on Home's birth certificate, it must have been an invention of the medium. This argument was supported by Hall's claim that though Home used the name of Dunglas later in life, it appeared (in the form of 'Dunglass') during the Lyon-Home case of 1868. This, Hall maintained, was deliberate confusion on the part of Home, who had apparently told Sir David Brewster that he was the son of the brother of the Earl of Home (rather than his father being the son of the Earl). Thus, Hall accepts Brewster's recollection as accurate, and concludes that Home avoided mentioning the name again until after Brewster's death.

As far as Hall was concerned, all of this was evidence of Home's willingness to deceive others, and therefore casts doubt on his abilities as a medium. Whatever one makes of Home's abilities as a medium, however, Hall's theories both about Home's use of the name of Dunglas (or, for that matter, of Dunglass), and about his claim to descent from nobility, are contradicted by direct evidence.

First, there are several letters to Home that use the names Dunglas and Dunglass prior to 1868, the earliest (to our knowledge) being written in 1851, four years before Home met Brewster (Home collection, SPR MS 28/139). Second, the misspelling of names was hardly rare at this time, as regular references to 'Daniel Hume' demonstrate. Third, to rely upon the recollection of Brewster seems somewhat optimistic given his clear contradictions when relating what happened at Home's séances (Lamont, 2005, pp.67-70), contradictions that Hall, for one reason or another, does not mention. Fourth, and perhaps most importantly, there is actually direct evidence that Home's father was the natural son of the tenth Earl of Home. According to John Dea of Colington parish, it was "a fact well known that he was a natural son of the late Earl of Home and was always spoken of by all as such". This testimonial, dated 1863, is part of the Home papers in the SPR collection at Cambridge (Home collection, SPR MS 28/139), an archive that has been available to all of Home's biographers, including Hall.

One might suggest, of course, that the testimonial is a fake, invented by Home to bolster his claim. However, there is no reason to assume that the witness was imaginary, since the Colington census of 1861 lists a John Dea, a retired papermaker, while the Currie census of 1841 lists a Dea family of the same occupation. As this was by no means a common surname, it is likely that John Dea had relatives in Currie when Home's father lived there, and as they were in the same trade in a small village, it is virtually certain they would have known William Home. And before one begins to hypothesize that Home had Dea fake the testimonial, one needs to bear in mind that there is no evidence whatsoever that Home ever used the testimonial to support his claim. From the available evidence, then, Home's claim about his father's lineage would seem to be intact, and the arguments against it are comparatively weak. Whatever other deceptions Home may or may not have been involved in, there seems to be no adequate reason for questioning this particular aspect of his background. What seems remarkable is that biographers have either accepted it without question, or else dismissed it on the basis of conjecture and insufficient checking of the sources. It would be easy to see this as the result of lack of care on a subject not directly related to the question of Home's ostensible paranormal abilities, but the amount of effort that has been expended on the topic suggests another reason.

Trevor Hall wrote at great length and in considerable detail about some of the more seemingly dubious aspects of Home's life. In doing so, he took every opportunity to point out minor errors made by others, all of which gave his writing a degree of rhetorical strength. The fact that he failed to notice, or at least failed to mention, that there was a piece of contradictory evidence in the archive that he himself had checked, only demonstrates that nobody is immune from error. Indeed, one might suspect that his rather obvious agenda to discredit Home as a medium was relevant, yet Zorab took a quite different

position on the question of Home's authenticity, and he did not consult the archive at all, while he misread the evidence that was before him. If this is the case in matters not directly related to the reality or otherwise of psychic phenomena, then what does that suggest in the case of evidence that does relate directly to such matters?

That such misleading interpretations of evidence have been presented on a matter that has no direct bearing on the authenticity of Home's phenomena suggests the problem may be more widespread. Indeed, one can find similar misrepresentations on the question of whether Home was ever caught cheating. The lack of strong evidence that Home was ever caught cheating has continually been raised in favour of the reality of his powers (e.g. Beloff, 1993; Braude, 1986). Nevertheless, there was a letter written by Dr Barthez, a physician in the court of Empress Eugenie, which claims Home was caught using his foot to fake phenomena during a séance in Biarritz in 1857. Count Petrovo-Solovovo (1930) stressed the importance of this letter, but Eugene Osty (1936) later sought to dismiss it. In doing so, Osty pointed out that there had been conflicting reports about where the alleged exposure had taken place, and that Frank Podmore (who had taken a sceptical line towards Home) had actually admitted there was no evidence of any weight that Home had cheated (Podmore, 1902). This, however, is highly misleading, since the Barthez letter was not published until 1912, a decade after Podmore stated his conclusion, and the conflicting reports were almost certainly the result of rumours operating in the absence of precisely this piece of evidence (Lamont, 2005, p.93). Neither Podmore's conclusion nor the existence of such rumours has any bearing on whether the Barthez letter is a valid piece of evidence. Furthermore, Osty (1936) cited the testimony of Princess Murat against the accuracy of Barthez's statement, yet failed to point out that she was not present at the time, rather she was referring to her own experience in 1863. Her evidence, therefore, is no more than a personal opinion based upon what she saw seven years after the alleged exposure took place. Paradoxically, the most recent attempt to debunk Home fails to note any of these flaws in Osty's argument, and instead concludes from this that the Barthez accusation "may well *not* be true" (Stein, 1993, pp.99–100)!

Whether or not this particular accusation is true is unlikely to be resolved. After all, Empress Eugenie appears to have contradicted herself when asked whether it had even happened (Perovsky-Petrovo-Solovovo, 1930, pp.249–251). But on the question of Home's origins, at least, the evidence is somewhat more straightforward. There is direct evidence that his father was known locally as the natural son of the tenth Earl of Home, and that Home himself used the associated middle name long before he returned to Britain. There is no evidence that Home faked this evidence, nor is there any evidence that he used it to back up his claim. It is, of course, possible that the claim was untrue, but even if that is the case, the balance of evidence suggests it was not Home who invented it. It is often said, of course, that extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence, but this is a claim about aristocratic descent. In that sense, whatever one makes of the claims that D. D. Home was extraordinary, his claim not to be common deserves to be taken more seriously.

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